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ABSTRACT

Studying local and national population distribution, as well as economic and social patterns, is becoming crucial for educators who serve rapidly changing communities. School officials should take into consideration the tremendous diversity in cultures, economic and family situations, and educational levels existing within an ethnic group. Several social and economic patterns characterize today's student population: (1) low income, two-income, single-parent, and homeless families are all on the rise; and (2) drug and alcohol abuse, pregnancy, suicide, and teenage dropout rates continue to challenge school districts. School officials can investigate demographic changes in their district in several ways, but it is recommended to compare enrollment by grade level to establish migration rates. As a result of shifting cultural makeup of student enrollment, the nation's schools will have to create productive, multicultural environments and address issues of racism and ethnicity. Comprehensive help to at-risk and low-achieving students is recommended. (11 references) (SI)

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By Amy Klauke

Studying local and national population distribution, as well as economic and social patterns, is becoming crucial for educators who serve rapidly changing communities. School officials often must reacquaint themselves with their constituents and investigate ways to better meet the social, physical, and educational needs of their particular populations. Most significantly, across the country people are facing the challenge of living as multicultural citizens.

How is the ethnic makeup of the youth population changing?

Immigration, migration, and fertility patterns indicate that by the year 2010 about 38 percent of people under the age of 18 in the United States will be African, Asian, or Hispanic American. By that time, in seven states and the District of Columbia, more than one-half of the children will be minorities: Hawaii (80 percent), New Mexico (77 percent), California (57 percent), Texas (57 percent), New York (53 percent), Florida (53 percent), Louisiana (50 percent), District of Columbia (93 percent). In an additional nineteen states, Joe Schwartz and Thomas Exeter report (1989), at least one-fourth of the population will be either African, Hispanic, or Native or Asian American.

In the next decade, experts predict that most immigrants will arrive from Asia and Latin America. According to James P. Allen and Eugene J. Turner (1988), 90 percent of these immigrants will settle in metropolitan areas, with the largest numbers coming to New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Each area in the U.S., however, hosts its own unique cultural blend. Hispanic-Americans, for instance, tend to concentrate in California and Texas, while significant numbers of Asian Americans can be found living in western coastal cities; African American communities are more strongly represented in the East and Southeast.

In studying such statistics, however, school officials should take into consideration the tremendous diversity in cultures, economic and family situations, and educational levels existing within each ethnic group.

What social and economic patterns characterize today's student population?

Low-income, two-income, single-parent, and homeless families are all on the rise. Drug and alcohol abuse, pregnancy, suicide, and teenage dropout rates continue to challenge school districts. These conditions account for an increase in students designated as "at risk."

Twenty-three percent of U.S. children, concludes Harold Hodgkinson (1988), are growing up in one-parent families, 90 percent of which are headed by single females. According to Kathryn Keough (1986), 62 percent of single-parent families have annual incomes of less than $10,000.

Children account for 40 percent of the nation's poor, with nearly one-fourth of U.S. children living in poverty (Hodgkinson 1989). John Carey (1989), in tracing the shift of the nation's middle-class from urban to suburban locales and gentrified city centers, says that "the poor are being pushed into an expanding belt between the rich center city and the prosperous outer suburbs." Families with children, Donna Harrington-Luecker (1989) reports, comprise 34 percent of the nation's homeless. Rural people account for one-fourth of the population in homeless shelters. School district residency requirements and transportation problems make it difficult for homeless children to attend school on a regular basis.

How might school officials investigate demographic changes in their district?

The number of students enrolled in a local public school varies as a result of changes in birth rate, migration patterns, and social conditions. The popularity of local private schools might also affect the number. Keough believes that by 1990 private schools will enroll 15 percent of the nation's elementary and secondary students. "Some kind of private school," she says, "now exists in virtually every town over 10,000 population."

Keough also claims that "dramatic regional differences in enrollment patterns can be expected for the remainder of the century." After brief increases, enrollment will most likely decline in the Northeast and Midwest, while in the West and parts of the South (notable California, Texas, Florida, and Arizona), it will rise significantly.

The birth rate in a specific area can be predicted, Thomas A. Glass (1987) notes, through studying:

- the number of women of childbearing age
- community expectations of family size
- past history of family planning efforts and abortion rates

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Glass recommends comparing enrollments by grade level to establish migration rates. If a 1989 freshman class of 325 becomes a sophomore class of 300 in 1990, this indicates a loss of 25 students, or a 7.6 percent negative migration rate. Over time, consistent data collection can show approximately how many students a school district is gaining or losing, at what level, and during what time of year.

How might school districts address the shifting cultural makeup of student enrollments?

As the nation's ethnic diversity increases, schools will have to develop ways to create productive, multicultural environments to accommodate diverse student backgrounds and native languages. Addressing the rise in multicultural classrooms requires commitment by school officials to second-language learners.

Issues of racism and ethnicity must be addressed. Teaching materials should be examined for racial, cultural, or gender biases. Only if students observe staff commitment to providing a fair, representative environment will they feel a sense of school ownership. Bilingual and special programs might need to be developed.

Teachers and staff should become familiar with the cultures represented in their classrooms while they promote an atmosphere of acceptance and cooperation. Forming integration teams is one way to provide a comprehensive study of multicultural classrooms. Some of the questions asked by members of a San Diego School District Integrated Monitoring Team ("Schools Focusing" 1989) include:

- Are all students actively involved in classroom instruction?
- Are classroom seating patterns racially balanced?
- Are reading materials provided in languages other than English for students who need them?
- Do notices on bulletin boards and in school publications reflect the ethnic makeup of the school?
- Are school clubs racially integrated?
- Are there overt signs of racism in the school?

Christine E. Sleeter and Carl A. Grant (1988) argue that the curriculum should be reformed so that it "regularly presents diverse perspectives, experiences, and contributions, particularly those that tend to be omitted or misrepresented."

How might school districts address changing social conditions?

A study of demographics suggests that the most urgent educational needs for the nation include comprehensive help to at-risk and low-achieving students. Believing that school performance is inextricably linked to social conditions, both David Snyder (1984) and Hodgkinson (1989) advocate a networking of services that attend to students' health, education, housing, legal, and transportation needs. Hodgkinson adds that special emphasis should be given to preventative measures such as providing adequate head-start programs, low-income housing, mass transit systems, health care and family counseling programs, and attention by the schools to low-achieving students.

Snyder recommends expanding early childhood development programs, child support services (health, nutrition, parenting, and language classes, for example) and the variety of teaching methods used in the classroom. To begin helping homeless children stay in school, Harrington-Lueker advises working closely with social service providers and homeless advocates as well as allowing for flexibility regarding administrative procedures.

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